

Narrator:

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President Obama has expressed support for the Afghan government's planned consultative peace jirga, which is aimed at discussing how to reconcile Taliban fighters with the rest of the country. The national council is "an important milestone that America supports," he said after a meeting with Afghan President Hamid Karzai at the White House May 12th. Obama said the United States supports efforts to "open the door" to Taliban fighters who are willing to cut their ties to al-Qaida and other extremist groups and renounce violence.

The jirga, scheduled for May 29th, is expected to attract 1,500 Afghan men and women representing political, tribal, business and civil society communities. Obama said a political component is ultimately needed to achieve Afghan peace and stability. He notes that "this is not just going to be a military solution."

The peace jirga, as well as a July donors conference in Kabul, sends a strong message of the Afghan government's "commitment to rule of law and good governance and human rights and women's rights," and as the government gains more confidence from the Afghan people, "their fear of the Taliban weakens," Obama said.

The president said the United States will continue to work with Afghan and international partners to avoid actions that harm the Afghan people. He said military efforts by Afghan forces and the International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, continue against the insurgents. Although the Taliban are responsible for most of the innocent civilian deaths in Afghanistan, Obama said he and ISAF commander General Stanley McChrystal are "ultimately accountable" for civilian casualties caused by coalition military operations, and they "do not take that lightly."

Karzai welcomed President Obama's commitment to transfer the responsibility for detention facilities to the Afghan government, saying he considered it "a major point of progress in our conversations."

President Obama acknowledged that President Karzai has made progress in improving governance in Afghanistan, but said both leaders agreed that "much more work needs to be done."

Obama pledged that the United States will "sustain a robust commitment" toward the country as the Afghan government assumes more security responsibility, and he welcomed the large delegation of Afghan ministers and officials who had come to Washington for the bilateral talks.

Americans are about to get a history lesson on Iraq by visiting Washington. Iraqi minister of culture Maher Dilli al-Hadithi inaugurated the Iraqi Cultural Center in Washington on May 10th. It is the first Iraqi government-sponsored cultural center outside of Iraq.

The inauguration ceremony included the return of Iraqi artifacts from American citizens to the Iraqi people. Television news anchor Don Shelby of Minneapolis inherited two cuneiform tablets from his father, an amateur archaeologist. After Shelby reported from Iraq, he knew where the artifacts belonged.

Al-Hadithi said it is because America hosts many cultures that the Iraqi government chose to open its first cultural center in the United States. He said the aim of the center is to strengthen cultural and communication ties between the two countries.

Two years in the making, the Iraqi Cultural Center houses replicas of ancient artifacts and is free of charge to the public. Sumerian statues stand alongside modern Iraqi art in the center. The center will host musical and other cultural events.

Iraq's ambassador to the United States said the center will help change American perceptions of Iraq from a country that is mired in violence to one that is steeped in civilization. The center exemplifies the spirit of cooperation between Iraq and the United States that was formalized in the 2008 Strategic Framework Agreement. One of the agreement's features focuses on strengthening cultural ties between the two countries.

With climate change awareness growing both in the host countries of U.S. embassies and among embassy staff, the U.S. State Department is finding that environmental initiatives are a basis for diplomacy. In light of a new mandate from President Obama to cut federal greenhouse gas emissions by 28 percent over the next decade, U.S. embassies worldwide have taken action to help meet that goal. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton launched her Greening Diplomacy Initiative on Earth Day 2009, calling on all employees to help shrink the Department of State's carbon footprint.

Greening Diplomacy initiatives are not only beneficial for U.S. embassies. They are also providing a great way to reach out and work with local communities and businesses. In Amman, Jordan, for example, there are no municipal recycling programs. But the U.S. embassy there learned of a small start-up company called Entity Green that believed there was a market for recycling in the Middle Eastern desert nation. The U.S. embassy became one of its first customers in 2009.

Over the past year, the Amman embassy has sent 30 tons of paper and cardboard, 4 tons of plastic, 2.5 tons of cans and 3 tons of glass to Entity Green's recycling station. This helped the new business get off the ground and attract new customers, including large hotel chains.

The U.S. consulate in Guangzhou, China, decided in January to revise its immigrant visa application and mail distribution processes to save trees, ink, printer electricity and money.

Staff at the embassy in Accra, Ghana, found a paper products company 30 kilometers from the embassy that produces toilet paper from old office paper. That company has agreed to pick up paper at the embassy once a week and provide the post with some free toilet paper.

These and other environmental initiatives are serving an important role in increasing awareness of embassy staff on the community development and conservation opportunities available through “green diplomacy.”

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